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The Squeeze on Israel

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Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir spoke bluntly to President Bush last week, saying that he and other Israelis believe the Arabs have concluded that the Bush administration will "deliver" Israel to the Arabs. And, in fact, many non-Likud Israelis also think that Arab leaders such as Syria's Hafez Assad have decided they have a sympathizer in the White House.

Some Israeli officials fear that instead of a ceremonial opening conference in Madrid followed by direct bilateral negotiations between the warring parties—which is what the administration promised Israel—Bush and company have in fact deceived Israel into participating in just the forum Jerusalem has long avoided: an international conference under U.S.-Soviet sponsorship.

When the Israeli prime minister visited Washington last week, he met first with Secretary of State James A. Baker. Baker told Shamir that the administration favored Washington as the site for the next stage of the talks, but the secretary didn't tell the prime minister that the invitations to the Washington meetings would go out that very night.

After the Baker-Shamir discussions, Israeli and U.S. journalists were invited to ask questions. According to an Israeli journalist who was present, Shamir, in response to one question, said the site of the next Israeli-Arab session had not yet been determined. Shamir allowed that he planned to discuss the question with the president the next morning. Baker sat by, silent.

A few hours after the Shamir-Baker meeting—and just hours before Shamir's scheduled appointment with President Bush—the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Bill Brown, delivered an invitation to the Israeli Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. Israel was invited to send delegates to a series of bilateral meetings in Washington. The proposed date was Dec. 4.

The invitation was accompanied by a letter from Washington sketching out U.S. ideas on topics that might be discussed at the upcoming meetings. The United States, for example, even broached the sensitive subject of Israeli territorial concessions on the Golan Heights and suggested that Israel consider what it might want Damascus to give in return for regaining the Golan, which was captured by Israel in 1967.

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From Israel's standpoint, Washington—merely by contributing to the agenda for the next stage of the Arab-Israeli negotiations—was violating its original pledge simply to hold an opening ceremonial meeting that would immediately break off into direct bilateral talks between the regional parties.

As to the question of the invitations—a matter of elementary courtesy as far as the Israelis are concerned—Shamir learned of the slight when he woke up last Friday only a few hours before he was scheduled to meet Bush at the White House. The prime minister turned on the television set in his hotel room and and saw Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi announcing that the Palestinians had received their invitation. Shamir then received a phone call from Foreign Minister David Levy confirming that Israel, too, had received an invitation; Levy also briefed Shamir on the accompanying U.S. letter.

Shamir understandably, was both upset and embarrassed. In his view, this mode of operating scarcely squared with the notion that Israel and the United States remain close allies.

During the prime minister's meeting with the president, the chief topic remained the venue of the next meeting. Shamir has long held that the first post-Madrid sessions should take place somewhere in the Middle East—either in Israel itself, in one of the Arab countries or on neutral turf.

The Israeli prime minister reminded Bush, Baker and national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, who served as note-taker, that the reason the parties themselves had not been able to agree on a site was simple: The Arabs had refused—in the face of Israeli attempts—to engage in any direct contacts with Israeli emissaries after the Madrid talks came to an end. Indeed, Israel's ambassador to Washington, Zalman Shoval, had actually telephoned the Jordanian ambassador in Washington to try to come to an agreement on certain procedural details. Shoval, however, was rebuffed; the Jordanian diplomat chose to tender his reply through the U.S. administration, thus avoiding direct contacts with Israel.

Bush appeared to expect Shamir simply to accept a Washington site as a fait accompli. But the president failed to realize the importance Israelis attach to venue questions.

Shamir insisted, yet again, that the direct bilateral meetings take place in the region. For Israel, the key to a genuine settlement is a manifestation of Arab willingness to accept Israel's intrinsic legitimacy, he told the president. Starting at Rhodes in 1949, Arabs and Jews have met a number of times under international auspices. But sitting across the table from each other, either in Israel or on Arab soil—without international auspices—would go a long way toward signaling genuine acceptance of the reality of a Jewish state in the Middle East.

Once the United States dictates the venue and the proposed topics of conversation, then—in Jerusalem's view—the Arabs are negotiating not with Israel but with the United States. One senior Israeli official put it bluntly: "Baker wants [us] to play in his back yard so he can beat us with his stick. He wants to steamroll us into a situation where we can't defend ourselves . . . to castigate us as hard-liners who don't want peace."

The president and the secretary of State apparently backed off in that they indicated Washington would be satisfied with but two meetings in Washington. While Shamir agreed in principle to this stipulation, he asked the American officials to tell the Arabs that future meetings should be held in the region itself. The Americans did not agree to this last request.

Shamir told Bush bluntly that the Arabs believe that with this administration, they have a better chance than ever before of getting Israel "delivered" to them by U.S. pressure. In reply to a question from Shamir, Bush denied that his administration has any intention of forcing Israel back to its pre-Six Day War boundaries.

The Israeli Cabinet has agreed to a Washington venue but is reluctant to commence negotiations before Dec. 9. It has insisted that the three bilateral meetings (Israel-Syria; Israel-Lebanon; Israel-Jordanians and Palestinians) be held at different times in the Washington area—in order to emphasize that even these sessions represent direct bilateral talks, not a resumed international conference.

Prof. Elie Kedourie of the London School of Economics, one of the world's leading Orientalists, remarked that these negotiations could turn out to be as big a failure as the U.S. military engagement with Iraq —due again to a lack of long-term thinking. "What is it that the administration wants to do in the Middle East?" Kedourie wonders.

But at least one high-ranking Israeli minister believes the Bush administration clearly has an aim: to pressure Israel into making enough concessions to both the Palestinians and the Syrians so that by November 1992 Washington can produce a signed peace agreement.